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**The ornamental vocabulary of the 10th century in the  
Carpathian Basin**

*Form-historical studies in decorative arts of the Hungarian  
Conquest period*

PhD Thesis

Abstracts

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## *1. History of research*

The ornamental vocabulary or, in other words, the visual arts of the 10th century in the Carpathian Basin have been one of the focal points of interest from the very beginning of archaeological research on the Hungarian Conquest period. Ferenc Pulszky, author of the first synthesis on the archaeological heritage of the ancient Hungarians, set the trend of future research with his evaluation of this ornamental vocabulary. He discussed all artistic elements appearing on 10th century objects under the heading “Ornament”. József Hampel, Pulszky’s son-in-law, followed the same approach in the late 19th and early 20th century, the period marked by the end of the grand European debate on ornament. From the 1900s onward, Hampel was also influenced by the views of the Viennese art historian, Alois Riegl; at the same time, he also drew from the scholarly works of Josef Srtzygowski, Riegl’s main opponent, who was lecturing in Graz at the time. Hampel was undoubtedly one of the last scholars in Hungarian archaeology to analyse the 10th century ornamental vocabulary of the Carpathian Basin within the framework of the European art historical and archaeological tradition.

During the next two decades, Conquest period studies were essentially characterised by data collection. In the 1930s, however, a new synthesis was created and propagated in a series of studies written by Nándor Fettich, then working in the Hungarian National Museum in Budapest. Owing to his excellent personal contacts with the leading European archaeologists of his age, as well as to his

knowledge of Russian, a fairly unusual ability at the time, Fettich was able to systematically study and assess the material published by Russian fellow-archaeologists, a corpus of finds his predecessors only had patchy recourse to. Influenced in his views by the works of Srtzygowski, one of his good friends, Fettich contended that the ornamental vocabulary appearing on the ancient Hungarians' metalwork had originally emerged and flourished in 9th century Eastern Europe under Irano-Sāsānian, Saltovo, early Islamic and Varangian cultural impacts. However, reading through his works from around the late 1940s, it is apparent that his research perspective on this material had shifted considerably. He gradually abandoned his earlier, strictly technological studies and became more concerned with the symbolic interpretation of archaeological artefacts. At roughly the same time, Gyula László, Fettich's junior and fellow-archaeologist, began his research along the same lines. In his studies discussing the symbolic reading of the Conquest period material published at the time, László constructed an entirely new interpretative model, according to which "Art" was a much more appropriate label for the 10th century decorative motifs that were previously designated as "Ornament" by Fettich and his predecessors. This new interpretation arose from László's conviction that the objects recovered from 10th century burials, once part of the ancient Hungarians' material culture, had been vested with magical powers, and had thus acquired a significance well beyond their material reality.

László's interpretation became widely accepted during the following decades. The first archaeologist, however, who broadened the scope of this interpretation and applied it systematically was István Dienes, one of László's students at the university, who decided to specialise in the Hungarian Conquest period. Starting his archaeological career in the 1950s, Dienes first turned to the issues surrounding 10th century arts and crafts from the 1960s and he became (and remained) the leading expert in the field during the following two decades. His name is inextricably intertwined with the – highly generalized – identification of the palmette ornament with the “Tree of Life” (or, more accurately, the “World Tree”) on the one hand and with the incorporation of the “Tree of Life” *leitmotiv* into the interpretative framework of the ancient Hungarians' shamanistic belief system on the other. Dienes's studies in this field marked a turning point because it strengthened the idea that the art historical study of the 10th century archaeological finds must by necessity be coupled with an interpretation of the ancient Hungarians' religion as well. The series of studies published by István Fodor from the 1970s onward further deepened this conviction: the art of the ancient Hungarians was presented as a well-readable imprint of the 10th century Hungarian shamanistic belief system both in Fodor's academic studies and in the books and articles written for the broader public.

The first major crack in the academic consensus of the late 20th century was caused by a short, but all the more scathing review article criticising the archaeological interpretation of the early

medieval artistic heritage written by Ernő Marosi, the doyen of contemporary Hungarian art historical studies. In his review of the catalogue published on the occasion of the 1100th anniversary of the Hungarian Conquest, Marosi correctly pointed out that the separate paths taken by archaeological and art historical studies in the early 20th century meant that by the late 20th century, the perception of Conquest period art prevalent among archaeologists was virtually meaningless in terms of art historical studies. Marosi's acerbic conclusion was "that at present, we lack a modern art historical perspective on the Conquest period". According to art historians, the basic axioms still used by archaeologists are wholly outdated and no longer tenable. Marosi called for a convergence between the interpretative framework and approaches used by the two disciplines, and he also urged a study of the archaeological material with a focus on artistic form. This work was begun by Károly Mesterházy in 1997. The author of the present thesis has every intention of continuing this line of enquiry.

## 2. *Methodology*

Partly as a consequence of the deficiencies of previous research described above, one of the main goals of the present thesis was systematisation: to create a classification and, to some extent, a typology of the ornamental vocabulary appearing on the currently known 10th century archaeological objects. It was clear from the very beginning that the determination of the basic forms and their variants would be a necessary prerequisite to the birth of a modern

art historical synthesis. Considering the hundred years' lag and that the present author was trained as an archaeologist, one of the principal tasks was to address problematic issues from an archaeological perspective in order to create a solid foundation for future art historical studies in this field.

It was therefore necessary to critically review the main paths of research from the 1870s onwards and to position the main thoughts and arguments of individual authors in the intellectual landscape of their times. A concise outline of the new advances in the period's research was included in order to place the profound changes in 9th–10th century Hungarian ornamental vocabulary into their one-time historical context. The brief reviews of the limitations of a study of this type and of the function of certain artefacts bearing a particular category of ornament that are almost exclusively known from grave inventories were similarly written with the purpose of placing the findings of the formal analysis into an appropriate context.

The study on artistic forms, indicated in the subtitle, provides the backbone of the present thesis. The approach and methodology is largely descriptive in nature. The first step, the identification and classification of the ornament classes appearing on 10th century objects was performed according to the nomenclature used in international research, which is essentially based on Riegl's *Stilfragen*, published in 1893. The determination of individual ornament classes was followed by an inventory of their occurrences and a description of their typological variations. The systematisation

of the 10th century ornamental vocabulary enabled a search for the possible formal parallels to individual motifs on the one hand and an enquiry into the possible origins of 10th century motif and pattern types on the other. In order to deepen our understanding of origins, I selected three ornament types as in-depth case studies for lengthier iconographical and iconological discussions.

In contrast to the methodological inconsistencies of earlier research, I tried to rigorously adhere to the appropriate and acceptable analytical sequence. A formal analysis always came first, while any conclusions were firmly anchored in the findings of the formal analyses (in contrast to most previous studies in this field that either entirely neglected studies on form or reversed the sequence of the two research phases).

### 3. *Results*

1. One of the main results of the present thesis was the deconstruction of earlier scholarly narratives. Based on my examination of the 10th century corpus of finds, I could illustrate the process whereby the interpretative models constructed by Hungarian archaeologists studying the 10th century finds of the Carpathian Basin drifted away not only from mainstream art history, but also from the generally accepted lines of enquiry employed in European and American archaeological studies, and how a research direction more in line with Soviet-Russian integration evolved. It is my belief that a clearer understanding of these processes will contribute to the revival initiated by E. Marosi and K. Mesterházy.



2. As a result of the formal analysis, the following ornament classes could be identified in the ornamental vocabulary used by various craftsmen (principally by silversmiths) in the Carpathian Basin during the 10th century: I. Vegetal ornaments: semi-palmettes (either free-flowing or ending in volutes), semi-palmettes with or without tendrils, tendrils curling into a semi-palmette at both ends, split palmettes, calyx palmettes, split palmettes unfolding from a single or twinned tendrils, split palmettes unfurling from tendrils ending in semi-palmettes, interlinked palmettes, three-, five-, seven- or more lobed palmettes, wing-palmettes, asymmetrical palmettes, palmette trees, continuous and intermittent scrolls; II. Floral-geometric ornaments: volute-calyx, *Volutenhakenpaar*, rosettes; III. Geometric ornaments: so-called running dog motifs, interlace ornament, circle-section motifs, dotted circles, peltas, swastikas, scale patterns, heart rows, elongated U motifs with a dividing line down the centre, astragalus beads, bead-rows, bead-and-reel; IV. Animal figures: real and imaginary quadrupeds and birds, unidentifiable creatures; V. Human figures. The patterns created from vegetal elements are dominated by simple patterns unfolding from a central point, lattice patterns and lobes unfurling from one other arranged in symmetrical or asymmetrical designs. Geometric designs generally follow a concentric or lozenge based arrangement. The ornament and pattern types described above clearly suggest that the ornamental vocabulary of the 10th century in the Carpathian Basin was in part inspired by the decorative arts of late antiquity and of the early medieval Mediterranean and the Near East (which were also rooted in

antiquity) and in part created through the transformation of traditional antique forms.

3. In order to better understand the structure of the available archaeological corpus, a separate section covers the raw materials and manufacturing techniques used by 10th century craftsmen. The most readily available information in this respect comes from metalwork. Other articles buried with the deceased were crafted from organic materials such as leather, wood and textile that have largely perished during the centuries owing to the soil conditions in the Carpathian Basin. More resistant antler and bone objects are seldom decorated. In this respect, no more than a survey of the extremely fragmentary find material and a hypothetical estimation of the losses were possible. The examination of metal finds suggested a metal production involving individual goldsmiths employing a relatively limited technical repertoire. Most objects are of low or medium quality and they were produced by the so-called thin-casting technique, although pressed and hammered and chased finds are also fairly common. Fire-gilding and tinning were widely used. Several inlaying techniques using metal, gem or glass inlays were employed; however, these are only infrequently attested among the finds. True granulation and filigree can most often be noted on imported articles. The in-depth examination of the metal finds originating from the 10th century Carpathian Basin also revealed that the unanimously held, but never tested theory, according to which the greater part of the metalwork was produced in specialised workshops, is hardly

tenable. It seems to me that instead of specialised workshops, we should rather assume the activity of itinerant goldsmiths.

4. The detailed assessment of the ornamental vocabulary preserved in the 10th century archaeological material from the Carpathian Basin is complemented by an overview of the cultural contacts outlined by the motifs and designs of this vocabulary. A review of the chronological position of several analogous finds from the Volga–Southern Ural region, the Dnieper–Dniester region, the Eastern European Viking centres, Scandinavia and present-day Bulgaria indicated that a significant change in decorative styles occurred during the final third of the 9th century in South-Eastern and Eastern Europe. This change is reflected by the emergence and rapid spread of a new decorative style, the so-called palmette style, across extensive territories of Eastern Europe. Owing to the uncertainties in the chronological schemes constructed by local specialists for the above regions, it is virtually impossible to determine with any degree of confidence the cradle of this change in decorative styles. What is clearly visible, however, is that most of the motifs regarded as hallmarks of the palmette style were also characteristic elements of the late antique and early medieval Mediterranean and Near Eastern visual arts. Therefore, the origins of the palmette style could potentially be sought in these southern regions too. Be as it may, the currently known corpus of finds definitely suggests that the ancient Hungarians became acquainted with and adopted the new ornamental vocabulary that figures so prominently in their heritage through their intensive contacts with

the ʿAbbāsid Caliphate, Byzantium and the Carolingian world during the 9th–10th centuries.

5. In order to broaden our understanding of the cultural contacts mentioned above, three iconographical and iconological case studies are presented for investigating the nature of the ancient Hungarians' artistic contacts with the late antique and early medieval Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultural world. The detailed examination of the purse mount from Grave 8 of the Tiszabezdéd cemetery offers an insight into cultural contacts with the Carolingian world. From my analysis of the cross in the middle field of the plate, the vegetal ornaments intertwined with it, and the *sēnmurw* and the unicorn figure flanking the cross, I concluded that the plate's design echoes a not particularly common, but nonetheless fairly well known Crucifixion iconography from the 8th–9th-century Carolingian world. The depictions on the braid ornaments from Rakamaz shed light on the cultural elements pointing towards the Byzantine-Balkan world. The iconography of quadrupeds set against a vegetal background appearing on the braid ornaments from Ibrány and similar pieces have their best counterparts among the depictions on contemporary Byzantine and/or Islamic silk fabrics, as well as on late Carolingian metal objects. In my view, these artistic connections are ample reflections of the multi-faceted cultural contacts of the ancient Hungarians in the 9th–10th centuries. It seems likely that the motifs and pattern types of the late antique/early medieval Mediterranean and Near Eastern ornamental vocabulary reached and spread among the ancient Hungarians either as a result of the activity

of foreign craftsmen working for the Hungarians voluntarily or through force, or through foreign objects arriving to the Carpathian Basin through trade connections, as part of booty or as gift exchanges between elites. One striking feature in the archaeological heritage of the ancient Hungarians arriving to the Dnieper-Dniester region in the earlier 9th century from their former lands east of the Volga is the gradual replacement of the ornamental elements inspired by Iranian figural art with the Mediterranean/Near Eastern palmette style of antique origins which, in a sense, is a reflection of their first encounters with Europe.

#### 4. *Publication*

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